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SUBJECT: VIETNAM UNENTHUSIASTIC ABOUT EAST ASIA SUMMIT

REF: A. 04 STATE 275091 B. 04 HANOI 3042

1. (SBU) Summary: Vietnam strongly supports ASEAN as the best way for smaller Asian countries to ensure that their interests are respected and sees the East Asian Summit (EAS) and the East Asian Community (EAC) as an effort by China to re-form the ASEAN+3 mechanism without ASEAN's solidarity. Vietnam reluctantly joined the consensus in favor of the EAS at the end of the Vientiane ASEAN summit, but believes that if the EAS is to avoid becoming a Chinese tool, it should open its doors to Australia, New Zealand and India, and possibly Russia and the United States. The purpose and agenda of the meeting are not yet decided, but the meeting will be held in December 2005 and include the current ASEAN+3 countries. End Summary.

2. (SBU) Duong Hai Hung, Deputy Director of the General Division of the MFA's ASEAN Department, told Poloff January 4 that Vietnam's highest priority is "ensuring a driving role" for ASEAN in any pan-Asian regional architecture mechanism. ASEAN's integration with other Asian countries should occur "step by step" to prevent "one big power" from dominating the region. Vietnam is far more cautious in this respect than Malaysia or Thailand, Hung noted. Thailand's and Malaysia's enthusiasm for formalizing the ASEAN+3 structure and creating the EAS is difficult to understand given that the existing structure allows ASEAN to dictate the agenda and timetable of meetings as well as to produce a post-meeting "chairman's statement" without consulting the other participants, Hung said. China's frustration with this system is understandable, Hung noted, because it reserves significant power for ASEAN and blunts China's ability to "dominate" smaller nations.

3. (SBU) Compounding Vietnam's discomfort with the EAS are the modalities and possible decision-making structure of the mechanism, neither of which has been formalized, Hung continued. "Vietnam supports a consensus-based approach focused on functional cooperation and economic development," Hung stated. "The EAS will reflect the concerns of all countries and could include political, economic and security issues." This would eliminate ASEAN solidarity and address larger issues outside of ASEAN, Hung said. In addition, Vietnam is concerned that the EAS "could have a significant impact, and could move very fast, unlike ASEAN." [Note: Vietnam likes ASEAN's measured pace because it allows Vietnam to keep the organization (and its members) away from sensitive political and security issues such as human rights. End note.] As a result, Vietnam supports widening participation in future EAS meetings to include New Zealand, Australia and India, and possibly Russia and the United States. "We will need to balance China in the EAS," Hung said. Many of these issues will be discussed at an ASEAN Senior Officials Meeting in Hanoi January 13-14, he added, and recommendations will be forwarded to the ASEAN Foreign Ministers for decision. Discussions of the agenda and purpose of the meeting are "in the future," Hung concluded, but the first meeting would almost certainly be held in December 2005 and include only the ASEAN+3 countries.

4. (SBU) Comment: As reported ref B, Vietnam greatly appreciates the minimalist approach represented by ASEAN, which values consensus and stays away from sensitive issues. In addition, the "ASEAN+3" structure allows ASEAN countries to interact with China and Japan with some degree of parity. GVN officials - from working level officers like Hung up to Vice Foreign Minister Le Van Bang - consistently reiterate that Vietnam wants to avoid a situation where China can effectively dominate its smaller neighbors. Forced to accept a one-country-one-vote mechanism in the form of the EAS, Vietnam will likely actively promote the expansion of the forum in future years to include other big powers, such as India and the United States, to balance China's influence. End Comment.

MARINE